



Lawn Care and the Creek

Here's a friendly reminder from Friends of Sligo Creek: when it comes to your lawn remember that *less* is often *more*.

Many people assume that pollution in small urban and suburban streams comes only from industrial sources. But researchers have found that overfed lawns often pose a large problem for small streams. This is because nitrogen running off of lawns with rain water quickly travels through storm drains and into local waters. Excessive nitrogen poses a serious problem for streams, rivers and bays. It can promote an excessive growth of algae. As the algae dies, the water is depleted of dissolved oxygen. This, in turn, can cause many kinds of fish and other aquatic wildlife to die.

Homeowners can have a big impact on what happens in Sligo Creek and within the larger Chesapeake Bay watershed. If you concentrate your efforts on building healthy soil instead of feeding the grass, you can significantly reduce the amount of nitrogen which runs off your lawn. One way to build healthy soil is to use fertilizers that come from a natural source such as compost or composted manure. "Grasscycling" by using a mulching mower is another good (and inexpensive) way to retain valuable elements needed by your lawn.

Many of the quick, water-soluble fertilizers sold in stores produce fast foliar growth but do little for the overall vigor of your grass. Instead, the Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection recommends the use of slow release fertilizers such as IBDU, sulfur-coated urea, ureaformaldehyde or methylene urea because they produce a more balanced rate of growth for your lawn.

It is also important to apply fertilizers at the correct time and in the correct amount. Many cool season grasses (such as Kentucky bluegrass) perform well when fertilized only once in the fall.

When you do fertilize, be sure to follow package directions carefully and only apply on grassy areas. Avoid spreading and leaving pellets on paved surfaces. This is a waste of money and also can cause large amounts of nitrogen to enter the Creek quickly. Sweep up anything accidentally left on the pavement and save it for next time.

People who hate to mow will also be glad to hear that reducing the size of your lawn can help. Trees, shrubs and perennial plants absorb and retain water better than grass. Trees can also help to improve air quality and over time may help to reduce the amount energy needed to cool your home in the summertime. And by shrinking your lawn you can also reduce the number of fumes caused by lawn mowers during the summer. As an extra bonus, well tended trees may even increase the resale value of your property.

So when you head out to take care of the lawn this spring and summer remember that less fertilizer and less grass can mean more for all of us to enjoy outside: more time, more money, cleaner air and a healthier Sligo Creek.

More great lawn and garden tips are available at:

Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection

www.montgomerycountymd.gov/deptmpl.asp?url=/content/dep/Grasscycling/home.asp

Good Neighbor Handbook: Tips and Tools for River-Friendly Living

www.potomac.org/action/education/goodneighbor.html

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